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Differential trespassing: Looking through and at an intersectional lens

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Running Head: Looking through and at an intersectional lens

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Abstract

In this article, I comment on the prospect of integrating an intersectionality perspective into the developmental sciences. I do this by sharing impressions, insights and questions that have emerged whilst attempting to look at and to look through an intersectionality lens. My comments focus on three main topics. First, I speculate what forms such an integration could take and argue that an integration that productively contributes to shaping developmental science into a transdisciplinary field is likely to change intersectionality research itself. I then reflect on the perceived ambiguity in terms of the unit of analysis (e.g., social systems vs. individuals) and the focus of research questions (i.e., description vs. explanation vs. intervention) in intersectionality research. Clarity and transparency in this regard is instrumental to productively identifying conceptual and methodological overlaps or intersections with other sub-disciplines in developmental sciences. Finally, I highlight the importance of development being more comprehensively reflected in the conceptualisations, the research questions, and the subsequently employed methodologies in intersectionality research. I conclude with a plea for allowing our expertise to intersect to transdisciplinarily work towards creating systemic and perpetual progress in the developmental sciences – something, I believe to resonate strongly with intersectionality researchers.

Deferential trespassing: Looking through and at an intersectional lens

We all have done it. Trying on someone else's glasses tends to elicit more or less predictable responses, in ourselves, but also from others. The most common effect is that familiar things seem to look different, but also, we tend to be perceived by others differently.

This special issue is meant to be an invitation to look at supposedly familiar concepts and approaches to research differently. In contrast to a simple swapping of spectacles, this is what I find genuinely exciting. As someone who would not necessarily classify as “intersectionalist”, I would like to take up this invitation and share some of the (in)sights gained by attempting to look *through* an intersectional lens and by looking *at* such lens. I intend to take up this invitation in the spirit of an attitudinal openness towards impulses originating from the conceptual and methodological far-field and by engaging in deferential transgressions across perceived and claimed demarcations of problem ownership.

Research starts with questions and ends with (new) questions. Questions in general can be effective enablers of the kind of conversation that is conducive to identifying commonalities and differences between supposedly different perspectives. An interesting effect of questions is that they tend to allow glimpses into the enquirer's perspectives on the issues in focus and they also reveal gaps in their knowledge and understanding. Questions can help trigger (self-)reflections in the addressee also. The questions I intend to pose fall into the generic categories of the What, the How and the Why.

To start with the latter, why ought we to be interested in an integration of an intersectional lens in developmental science? Admittedly, the actual question is what should be expected from an integration and what such an integration would look like. At least three positions are conceivable, (1) developmental scientists should become intersectionalists, and (2) intersectional research should adopt a developmental perspective. The Solomonian perspective would be that (3) it will be a bit of both. As an example, I can imagine that an integration of psychological theories (and methodologies) into an intersectional framework can help us in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the role of individual differences in the development of identities and in the mechanisms of coping with perceived oppression. Conversely, introducing an intersectional perspective into psychological research is likely to broaden the view on identities and their development by considering their embeddedness in a hierarchy of social and societal structures. Analogue projections can be made in relation to sociology, education and other disciplines under the umbrella of developmental sciences. In

any case, by confronting developmental scientists with the notion of intersectionalism, intersectionalism itself is likely to change too.

Research conducted within the boundaries of disciplinary or other orthodoxies will rarely have positive impact in effectively addressing real-life problems as such problems tend not to be of a monodisciplinary nature. Integration should therefore go beyond disciplines “merely” working together, although, this would still be considered progress in terms of interdisciplinarity in some quarters. Mastering the dynamic challenge of making subject specific demarcations productively permeable will bring forward developmental science and make it truly transdisciplinary. The main concern of intersectionality research is to address the insufficient consideration of the intersectionality of attributed or self-adopted identities. This points into the right direction. I would argue that the intersectionality of discipline-related categories or identities such as neuroscientist, geneticist, psychologist, anthropologist, sociologist, educationalist etc. is underrepresented in many intra- or inter-disciplinary debates, and as a result, progress towards a more transdisciplinary perspective is repressed. Developing transdisciplinarity is challenging in more than one sense. For instance, a transdisciplinary perspective is likely to challenge existing organisational structures in academe, that is universities with their Departments of X, Schools of Y and Faculties of Z.

Integration should start with the identification of valences, links and overlaps between the existing and the new. Clarity regarding overlaps, for instance, is instrumental to avoiding redundancies and to focussing on potential synergisms (one of the benefits of transdisciplinarity). Consequently, the next question to be posed is what intersectional research aims to achieve, which can be translated into the question: what are the indicative research questions that intersectionality researchers address?

From a social science perspective, research can be seen as employing a set of three different kinds of lenses. The first lens is used to take a look at the phenomena of interest to obtain a thorough description of these phenomena. With the second lens one aims for explanations and understanding. The focus of the third lens is on prediction of change and interventions. Insights gained from using these three lenses are hierarchically dependent. That means, a proper description of the phenomena of interest is a necessary (but not sufficient) precondition for developing adequate levels of understanding of the causal mechanisms that underlie them. An adequate understanding or explanation of the phenomena under question is again a necessary, yet not sufficient precondition for research to have meaningful impact in the “real world”, e.g., in form of effective interventions. Admittedly, this last statement

reflects an ideal. We all can think of interventions (in education, for instance) that have been shown to be effective, yet we cannot explain why. In other words, in the urge to bring about change the focus often seems to be exclusively on the “What works” question whilst the “Why does it work” question tends not to get the attention it deserves.

Continuing on a metaphorical level, which lens to choose is determined by the research question one asks. An exploratory question aiming at a description of, say, how oppression is perceived by a particular group of individuals, calls for a different research design than an explanatory research question that might be aiming at determining whether there is a causal link between levels of awareness and the capacity to cope with or resist oppression. This, in turn would be different from an intervention-focussed research question such as evaluating the effectiveness of a psychoeducational intervention that aims at awareness raising in terms of mental health and well-being. In short, descriptions should not be mistaken as explanations, nor should observed effects be interpreted as evidence of understanding. Risks of doing so are potentially nurtured by the way aspects of human existence are translated into variables studied in empirical research (i.e., the operationalisation of a construct). In general terms, category labels are simplifications, they are created by emphasising some (perceived) characteristics over others, they are descriptors and do not necessarily represent explanations. For instance, category labels referring to race, gender, ethnicity, age or specified kinds of behaviour tend to be anchored in salient, more or less readily observable features of a person. Categories such as these, therefore have very limited *explanatory* value in terms of the causal mechanisms amongst them (i.e., their intersectionality), or between them and experiences of oppression. In other words, circular uses of descriptors do not constitute explanations that further understanding.

To be clear, research, be it intersectional or otherwise, does not have to engage all three lenses (i.e., descriptive, explanatory, and predictive) in its process. Important in terms of potentially contributing to transdisciplinarity, however, is clarity as to which lenses are being applied. My admittedly brief glance *at* the intersectional lens left me struggling to clearly determine what intersectionalism is meant to be. For example, is it an analytic tool for (a) understanding structural oppression in its cyclical perpetuation? Or is it about (b) examining how individuals develop an awareness of the role their intersecting identities have in their lives? Or is it (c) concerned with how socially constructed categories overlap and interact in relation to social inequality? In terms of units of analysis, (a) focuses on (social) systems, (b) focuses on individuals or groups of individuals, whilst (c) appears to primarily have a conceptual and subsequently a method focus. Clarity and transparency in this regard

are essential to a productive integration of intersectional research as these help in determining conceptual and methodological overlap with other (sub-)disciplines in developmental sciences and subsequently identifying potentials for synergisms. Vagueness in this regard, however, is likely to impede integration. It might even create the risk of getting lost in a conceptual and methodological no-man's land.

An integration of an intersectional lens into or with developmental science in a transdisciplinary sense, hinges on the pivotal question of how development is embedded in intersectionality research, conceptually as well as methodologically. Here again, one would need clarity as to whether we would be primarily looking at the development of social systems in various levels of granularity, the development of individuals, or the development of social categories and their interactions. All these foci can be studied with a descriptive, explanatory or prescriptive lens. A way to operationalise development in empirical research is via (observable) change. It is my impression, however, that change is rarely in the focus of an intersectional lens. Change can be described, explained, or brought about at the level of systems, at the level of individuals or at the level of operationalisations of constructs (e.g., identity). For example, changes in the patterns in which individuals' identities intersect over time could be conceptualised as development. Such changes within individuals could be studied in terms of the development of resiliency, which might add an intervention focus to an intersectional lens.

The dynamics of change are complex. Hence an argument for the necessity of transdisciplinary approaches to research in developmental science is easy to make. The study of development of individuals takes place between the poles of a nomothetic orientation at one end and an ideographic one on the other. Individual trajectories – derived from the latter – are mapped against the general or typical, which is derived from the former. Studying such deviations – negative as well as positive(!) ones – is one of the approaches to research of development. As is the case in any other research area, in intersectionality research many questions remain unanswered, but some should not be left unasked. One of those questions is, how is development reflected in the conceptualisations, the research questions, and the subsequently employed methodologies in intersectionality research?

Returning to the lens metaphor adopted at the beginning of this article, such and other questions could make one *look back through* one's own lens. This is also likely to create an unfamiliar image, of oneself, in this instance. I would like my comments to be perceived as

encouragement to do so. In order to foster transdisciplinarity in tackling real world problems, we should go beyond interpretative judgements in the form of “Oh gosh, you must technically be blind!” when attempting to see through someone else’s lens. We rather should actively and openly engage in allowing our disciplinary expertise to intersect to transdisciplinarily work towards creating systemic and perpetual progress in the developmental sciences.